



*While the CRP cost-share option has the most acres and visibility in the Game and Fish Department's private land program, habitat plots like this tract in the Turtle Mountains offer variety in both wildlife and terrain.*

# PLOTS for the Future

## Private Land Programs Now Offer More Options, Opportunities

Story and Photos by Craig Bihrlé

The Game and Fish Department's 2003 PLOTS Guide rolled off the presses recently with good news for people who hunt in North Dakota. The Private Lands Open To Sportsmen program has more acres enrolled than last year, and more options are available to landowners who are looking for ways to improve wildlife habitat and add to their bottom line at the same time.

"It's going very well," said John Schulz, North Dakota Game and Fish Department private land section leader, referring to the

agency's Private Land Initiative, a program that involves cooperating landowners in a variety of projects that build habitat and open private land to walking hunting access.

That's probably an understatement. Schulz and his private lands section staff have worked feverishly to add more than 140,000 acres of PLOTS land since last year, an increase of about 64 percent. This occurred during a time when contracts affecting thousands of acres of existing PLOTS had to

be reworked to allow for drought-induced emergency haying and grazing of Conservation Reserve Program grasslands last summer. On top of that, new CRP management rules established as part of the national 2002 Farm Bill required contract revisions with many cooperators this summer.

Game and Fish's private land program expansion accelerated in 2002 after Governor Hoeven authorized, and the state legislature's emergency commission

approved, three new private land biologist positions and use of \$1.5 million per biennium from the Game and Fish reserve fund. On top of that, the 2003 legislature passed, and Governor Hoeven signed, a bill to allow up to five additional PLI positions and another \$3.3 million per biennium in spending authority.

This extra commitment to habitat and private land hunting access by state leaders comes at an opportune time. Private lands biologists were still, even as this magazine went to press in late August, trying to follow up on positive contacts developed through a mailing to landowners in February. A brochure detailing each of the Department's private lands programs went to all producers in 31 counties, and generated a "huge response," Schulz said. "Because of this, we saw substantive growth in our CRP cost-share acres and our habitat plot acres."

Without the three new people hired last summer, stationed at district offices in Williston, Jamestown and Harvey (Lonetree WMA), the Department could not have handled the response from such a large promotion, Schulz said. With four more biologists starting by September 2003, the potential for future growth is enhanced as well. Two of the new positions, Schulz said, are based in Dickinson, one is in Riverdale, and one is in the Bismarck district habitat office.

The Dickinson district office will have two private lands biologists, Schulz said, because of increasing interest in having more PLOTS in the high pheasant harvest counties in southwestern North Dakota. In addition to extra staff, the Department is also developing new programs and new incentives to make private lands options more attractive to producers in areas where the greatest demand exists for more public access.

"Our programs will continue to be viable considerations for producers, as we change the programs, or as producers' situations change," Schulz said. "At the same time, we're maintaining our commitment to habitat-based access. We're not going to go out and start leasing land just for access. It has to look like a place someone would want to hunt. This philosophy serves the agency, and North Dakota's hunters well."

### CRP Haying and Grazing in 2002

Lingering drought in the northern Great Plains affected many Conservation Reserve Program acres enrolled in the Game and Fish Department CRP cost-share option of the PLOTS program. Because of dry conditions, in early July 2002 U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman opened all CRP in North Dakota to emergency haying and grazing. Otherwise, CRP can only be hayed or grazed if the original contract had a maintenance feature included, and typically these involved one maintenance during the life of 10-year contract, or two during a 15-year contract.

PLOTS CRP cost-share contracts between landowners and Game and Fish did not allow for any haying or grazing, except for the maintenance feature. In return, producers received one-half the cost of grass seed for the CRP acres, up to \$20 per acre. The payment also covers walk-in hunting access to the land for the duration of the CRP contract.

Despite the contract language, Game and Fish received many requests from cooperators to hay or graze their PLOTS land anyway. In an effort to try to help producers who desperately needed hay, Game and Fish biologists developed a mitigation plan to try to replace CRP acres that would be hayed.

The mitigation plan allowed haying of up to 50 percent of CRP cost-share acres in exchange for two acres of additional access elsewhere for one hunting season, or one acre of additional access for two hunting seasons, for every acre hayed. More than 10,000 of these replacement acres remain active this fall. Hunters should be aware that some of these areas may include associated cropland, pasture and other non-CRP land.

Statewide last year, just over 1 million acres of CRP was hayed or grazed under the emergency provisions. That's about 31 percent of all CRP acres in the state. Game and Fish had about 127,000 acres under contract in the CRP cost-share program. Nearly 17,000 acres were hayed and 16,400 acres were replaced, though only about 6,800 replacement acres were CRP or non-cropland. The replacement acres should have totaled 19,518, Schulz said, but due to maintenance provisions in the CRP contract and haying without Game and Fish approval, a 3,119-acre habitat loss occurred.

During late October, Game and Fish private lands staff surveyed PLOTS tracts in seven south central and southwestern counties and found that 53 percent, or 111 of 208 PLOTS tracts in those seven counties, were hayed. Of 111 tracts hayed, 64 cooperators did so under revised contracts that came with replacement acres, and 47 cooperators simply hayed their tracts without approval or mitigation acres.

"It wasn't the best situation, really," Schulz said of the weather conditions that led to emergency CRP haying and how that might have affected wildlife habitat and hunting potential. "But, with the ample rain we've had this year, those hayed CRP acres are probably looking just excellent."

### 2003 CRP Management Revisions

Last summer's drought emergency that allowed CRP haying prompted short-term fixes to some private lands contracts. New nationwide rules governing CRP management required some long-term solutions if the Game and Fish Department wanted to maintain value in terms of both wildlife habitat and hunting potential on its PLOTS CRP cost-share tracts.

*CRP cost-share tracts sometimes contain adjacent cropland that is included in a contract to help square off an area for easier boundary signing.*





New CRP permissive use management rules allow, but do not require, haying or grazing of a tract every three years. For instance, a landowner could hay or graze an entire CRP field every third year, or hay or graze a different one-third of a field every year.

In an effort to accommodate CRP cost-share contract holders who want flexibility to hay or graze their tracts, Game and Fish biologists developed an option that allows limited haying and grazing only after August 1 of each year (after the primary nesting season), and only 50 percent of a field can be hayed or grazed in any one year. Such an option maintains at least half of any field as habitat for hunters in any given year, and that same field would have residual cover for nesting game birds the following spring.

"We wanted to avoid having a PLOTS tract totally hayed every third year," Schulz said of the new option offered to contract holders in June.

Another option offered by Game and Fish encourages contract holders to not hay or graze their CRP cost-share tract under any circumstances, including future drought emergencies. This option comes with an additional incentive of an up-front payment of \$2 per CRP acre for each year left in the contract. For example, if a producer has five years left in his contract with Game and Fish, and has 160 acres of CRP enrolled, the up-front payment would be \$1,600 – five years x 160 acres x \$2 per acre. Maximum payment to any one landowner is \$4,000.

Landowners enrolled in the no haying or grazing option are also eligible for up to 100 percent cost-share to perform mid-term management on their CRP. USDA-Farm Service Agency will cost-share 50 percent, while Game and Fish and Pheasants Forever, a private conservation organization, will provide the other 50 percent cost-share funds and technical service to facilitate mid-term management.

"Formerly, this program only reimbursed landowners for up to half the cost of grass seed, in exchange for hunting access," Schulz stated. "The new two-tiered approach should be attractive to producers who opt to manage hay and graze on an annual basis, or those producers who have no intention of haying or grazing their CRP tract and are interested in mid-term management."

Since contract revision letters went out in early June, Schulz added, about 75 percent of cooperators have selected the "no haying" option for their CRP cost-share acres.

### **New Working Lands Program**

While CRP cost-share is the most popular Department private lands offering, Schulz is excited about the possibilities for a new program that embraces working agricultural land such as pasture, crop fields and odd acres. Habitat and CRP cost-share PLOTS relate more to long-term set-asides of certain lands, Schulz said, while working lands programs will include active agricultural land. Contracts are mostly for shorter terms and have potential to work well with federal programs, which will help boost financial incentives for producers.

Schulz and his private lands staff plan to have the working lands program finalized and ready to offer to landowners this fall. Early concepts include competitive evaluation based on number of acres offered, number of wetland and upland acres, farming practices used such as no-till vs. conventional tilling, rotational grazing, timing of haying, trees, shelterbelts, location in relation to other lands open to public hunting, and many others.

Working lands incentive payments will also be graduated, with higher ranking tracts receiving higher payments, possibly up to \$5 per acre per year, Schulz noted. "We'll be looking for those areas that produce wildlife and offer expectations for hunters in the fall," Schulz emphasized. "We're looking for the 'good stuff' that's already there, then perhaps we can develop more habitat in areas that won't affect a farming operation."

As with all other Game and Fish private lands programs, working lands agreements will include access to walking hunters.

### **A Look Forward**

While the number of PLOTS acres has increased significantly from last year, and

the short-term future is promising, a great majority of North Dakota hunting will still take place on private land. The state will never have enough public access land to guarantee everyone a productive, competition-free hunting spot.

While all Game and Fish habitat-based access programs are designed to provide places that people want to hunt, and just about every PLOTS tract can provide a quality hunt on the right day, some attract heavy hunting pressure. The nature of public land is that it's open to everyone, and people who rely solely on public land for hunting experiences often encounter others who have the same idea.

The Game and Fish Department encourages hunters to develop diverse plans that include private and public land. While private land access isn't always easy, it is attainable. Rewards are often friendships and places to go that don't include worry over whether another group is just over the hill.

Across North Dakota, the Game and Fish Department is working with private landowners to provide hunting access in areas with a variety of game. Not every PLOTS tract has pheasants or ducks or deer or grouse, but every one has something. Not every landowner is interested in a cooperative venture, but for those who are, Game and Fish likely has a program that will fit into just about anyone's operation.

"I'm excited about the potential for growth," Schulz said, "Not only in acres, but also in habitat development and management over the next few years."

"We recognize that the future of North Dakota wildlife must spring from the productivity of private lands."

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**CRAIG BIHRLE** is the Game and Fish Department's communications supervisor.

### **PLOTS Guide Available at License Vendors**

This fall, more than 360,000 acres of Private Land Open To Sportsmen tracts, identified by triangular yellow signs, are open to walking hunting access, up from 220,000 last fall. Without a map, North Dakota hunters will find these tracts only by coincidence.

With maps, contained in the 2003 PLOTS Guide, hunters can locate all PLOTS acres, as well as most other public land open to hunting in North Dakota.

PLOTS Guides are free and available at most private license vendor sites in the state, at county auditor offices, at the Game and Fish Department's main office in Bismarck, and at Game and Fish district offices in Riverdale, Williston, Dickinson, Jamestown, Lonetree (Harvey), Devils Lake and Oakes.

The guide is also available in pdf form on the Department's website at [discovernd.com/gnf](http://discovernd.com/gnf), click on the "Hunting in ND" tab and scroll down to the PLOTS Guide link.

# PRIVATE LANDS PROGRAMS AND PROGRESS (2003 acres as of July 31)



## CRP Cost-Share

2003 acres – about 177,000

2002 acres – about 128,000

Offers up to 50 percent cost-share on the cost of seed for establishing cover, and an incentive payment for maintaining cover, on land enrolled in the USDA Conservation Reserve Program.

This program initially centered on high pheasant harvest counties in southwestern North Dakota, and has expanded to include the rest of the state. These tracts all contain CRP grasslands; many also contain other types of habitat or farmland included to square off the tract.



## Habitat Plots

2003 acres – about 142,000

2002 acres – about 98,000

Habitat plots include 3-6-year rental, or 10-20 year long-term contracts, of newly established and/or existing cover that provides nesting, wintering or other key wildlife habitat. Habitat plot payments are based on soil rental rates in various regions of the state.



## CoverLocks for Conservation

2003 acres – about 14,500

2002 acres – about 10,100

CoverLocks tracts are designed to create winter cover for resident wildlife. This program uses U.S. Department of Agriculture Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program to establish 20-acre habitat complexes near or within priority watersheds. A CoverLock includes 15 acres of grass and five acres of trees.

Involves up-front incentives and annual payments for habitat establishment and access for 30 years. Access also includes the entire quarter section that contains the CoverLock.

Program is entering its third year and habitat is in various stages of development. Trees, of course, will take many years to mature, but the grasses will fill in quickly.

“Some of them look pretty good,” says Jon Roaldson, Game and Fish CoverLocks coordinator. “The trees look good this year compared to last year. That’s one of the things that’s noticeable.”

However, trees on these areas are still young and hunters are urged to avoid disturbing them.

## Native Forest Conservation

2003 acres – about 13,500

2002 acres – about 9,000

Provides multi-year rental payment for maintaining and protecting native woodland habitat on private land. In addition, Game and Fish works with many landowners on forest habitat improvement projects.

Much of this acreage is in the Pembina Hills and Turtle Mountains and many tracts about Game and Fish wildlife management areas.

## WRP Incentive

2003 acres – about 2,800

2003 acres – about 1,500

Wetlands Reserve is a USDA program that pays landowners for long-term or permanent easements for restoring wetlands. Game and Fish makes additional payments for agreements that allow walking public hunting access on the tract.

Through this USDA-Game and Fish partnership, producers can receive payments of up to 90 percent of the appraised value of their land for 30-year easements.

## Tree Planting Cost Share

2003 acres – about 2,200

2002 acres – about 1,500

Game and Fish offers cost-share funds to landowners as an incentive for establishing wildlife tree plantings on private land. Payments vary depending on whether the tree planting and associated acreage are open to public access.

## Beginning Farmer

2003 acres – about 1,600

2002 acres – about 900

Piggybacks on a North Dakota Natural Resources Trust program that offers incentives for beginning farmers who incorporate selected conservation measures into their operation. Game and Fish participation includes public access agreements.

## Food Plots

2003 acres – about 1,900

2002 acres – about 1,500

Provides annual establishment and rental payments for planting of agricultural crops that are left unharvested for wildlife food during winter. Food plots and some adjacent lands are open to walking hunting access.

For more information on Game and Fish private lands programs, contact John Schulz, Game and Fish private lands section leader, at 701-328-6327; [jwschulz@state.nd.us](mailto:jwschulz@state.nd.us). CoverLocks for Conservation contact is Jon Roaldson, 328-6308; [jroaldso@state.nd.us](mailto:jroaldso@state.nd.us).